



Education Endures: Protecting the Futures of the World's Most Vulnerable Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic



“What keeps me up at night are the [effects of COVID-19] on vulnerable populations. I cannot imagine being a parent in those circumstances.”

- Melinda Gates
in an interview
on CNN

Their Greatest Need is Our Greatest Need

If there is one lesson from the pandemic, it's the need to be nimble and adaptable. Like many NGOs, we have seen revenue projections decline steeply as a result of canceling all in-person annual fundraising events. We depend on you to fill the gap. Your contribution to our greatest needs enables us to immediately address pressing educational needs without pausing to secure funds.

Learning has been disrupted for most of the world's children. But for millions of children in low-income communities, COVID-19 school closures will not be an interruption, but an end: an end to reading, an end to learning, and an end to the dream of making positive change in their own lives and communities.

Girls are particularly at risk of losing their very childhoods under these circumstances. That's because families suffering extreme economic hardship often choose to marry their daughters early. Girls in precarious financial situations can also fall victim to sex trafficking or other means of exploitation. As families deal with unprecedented levels of stress, the risk of intrafamily conflict and gender-based violence also increases, negatively impacting girls' self-confidence, well-being and ability to negotiate key life decisions.

Providing Human Connection at a Critical Time

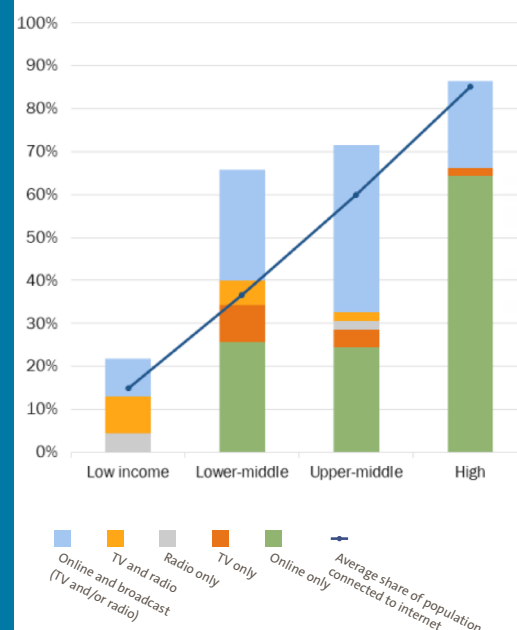
Room to Read's distance learning programs serve as an essential lifeline to the world's most vulnerable children. Our educational interventions do not depend on internet connectivity because this is largely unavailable in the areas we serve. According to UNESCO, half of the total number of students out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic don't have access to a household computer and 43 percent have no internet at home. In low-income countries, the disparities become more pronounced: In sub-Saharan Africa, 89 percent of learners do not have access to household computers and 82 percent lack internet access.

To facilitate learning in this environment, Room to Read provides human connectivity via the channels that are most accessible to low-income children, including telephone, radio and TV broadcasts, as well as text messaging and the distribution of hard copies of educational materials. This work fills a critical gap; according to research by Brookings, less than 25 percent of low-income countries currently provide any type of remote learning.

“The data suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic will have huge impacts on student learning across the world, but students in low-income countries and those in sub-Saharan Africa will be the most negatively affected. In these countries, governments have been less able to provide remote learning opportunities and guidance to teachers to address student learning needs during the crisis.”

- Brookings report, “School closures, government responses, and learning inequality around the world during COVID-19,” April 14, 2020

Share of countries responding to school closures with different forms of remote learning, by income group



Source: Center for Global Development and the World Bank

BROOKINGS

OUR LITERACY PROGRAM

“Education is the only thing that cannot be taken away. It is the key to fulfilling my dreams.”

- Parbati, Room to Read Girls' Education Program Participant

Meeting Young Learners and Their Families Where They Are

Our staff members live and work in the countries where Room to Read operates. They are local nationals with a deep understanding of complex community needs and cultures, and strong government relationships that allow us to partner for maximum impact. This enables us to facilitate learning using the most powerful tools and media available locally.

Taking to the Airwaves

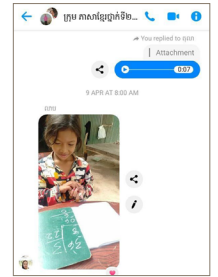
Without internet connectivity, radio is still the most commonly available and accessed technology across the globe. UNESCO reports that 75 percent of households globally have access to radio, so we are focusing much of our efforts on that medium.

- In Sri Lanka, for example, we are partnering with regional broadcast services, providing content in both Tamil and Sinhala. The radio programs focus on storytelling for children and literacy tips for parents on how best to support their children's reading development at home.
- For our project work in Rwanda, we have developed audio lessons for students in Grades 1 to 3. We are collaborating with the Rwanda Education Board (REB) to develop scripted literacy lessons for students to follow, alongside reference learning materials accessible via the REB.
- In Bangladesh, we are working to run 26 episodes of our digitized storybooks with animation on Duroto TV, a popular distributor of children's content.

Spreading the Message Via Texts

Texting has become another common form of communicating around the world. Since text messaging offers a scalable, inexpensive and accessible way of communicating in many countries, Room to Read has turned to texting to prompt parents to engage in literacy activities with their children.

- In Cambodia, for instance, the Literacy Team is developing text and video guidance for parents. The content focuses on highlighting the most important literacy skills, and providing tips, actionable advice and encouragement for parents. These messages also support children's use of Room to Read's classroom instruction materials.



Developing Students' Skills Through Worksheets

Traditional resources, like worksheets and books, are also essential components to keep children learning during this time. Our previous experience creating worksheets to support distance learning for refugee populations — Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, for example — has provided us with valuable knowledge in this area. We are using similar methodologies to help children who do not have access to technology to continue learning during this crisis.

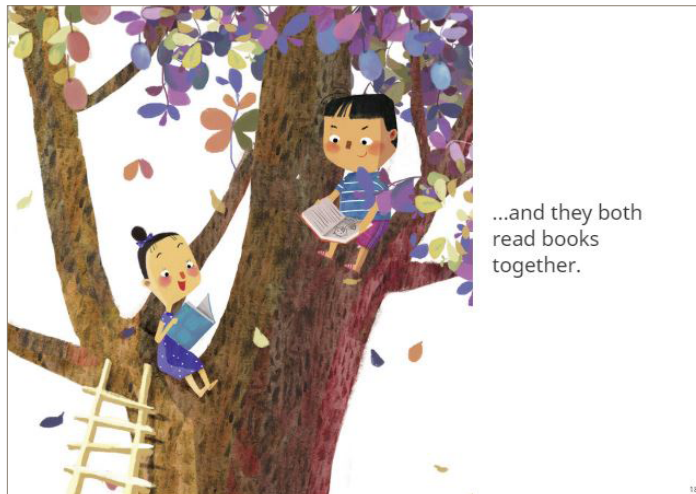
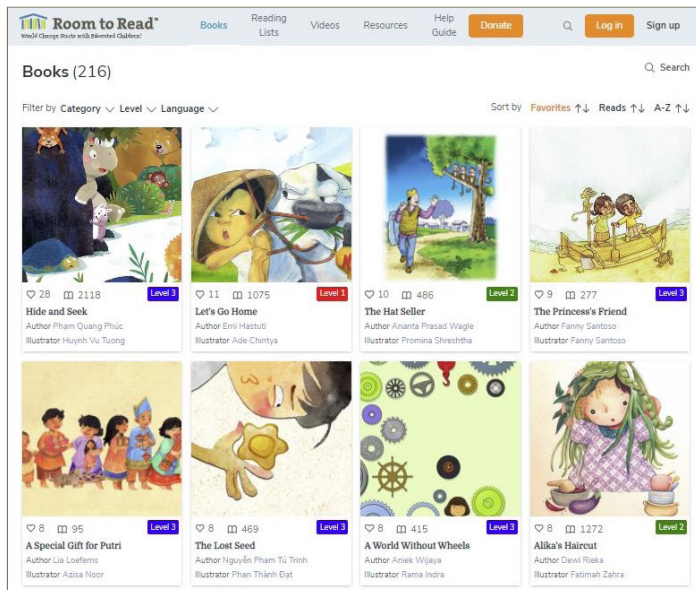
- In India, for instance, we are creating an offline literacy package for children in grades 1 and 2 that includes approximately 60 worksheets per child and will provide writing opportunities for children (both skill-based and creative writing). We anticipate that these materials will be distributed through schools as parents come to pick up food provisions for their families.



Ensuring Education for All

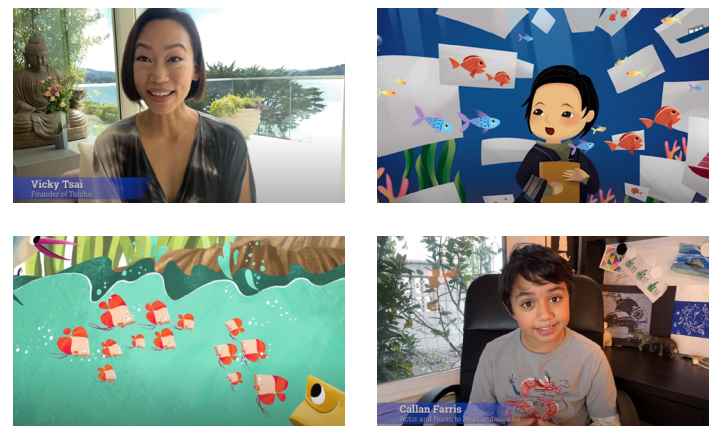
Room to Read's mission is to ensure all children are able to learn and reach their full potential. For children and families who do have digital access, Room to Read provides a unique digital learning platform, Literacy Cloud.

Based on Room to Read's award-winning, proven Literacy Program that combines the science of learning to read with the magic of powerful storytelling, Literacy Cloud includes hundreds of local language book titles and a rich library of professional development materials for educators and children's book creators. Room to Read launched Literacy Cloud in English and Bahasa Indonesia in 2019, with over 200 children's storybook titles.



Today, in the face of school closures, children need access to high-quality reading material more than ever before. Thus, we are in the midst of expanding our digital book portfolio with new releases of 750 children's book titles from around the world, in their original languages. We are also sharing Room to Read's digital book portfolio on local distribution channels, especially on national platforms that governments are using to deliver learning materials to students and their families.

- In Bangladesh, for example, we are using the government's educational platform to distribute classroom instruction videos, read-aloud videos of our books and animated TV episodes. In addition, we are using the government platform there to point children and educators to Literacy Cloud. Among all of the organizations sharing digital content on the government platform, Room to Read is the only organization providing leveled storybooks that are also culturally relevant.



We recently released read-alouds of original Room to Read titles on Literacy Cloud narrated by notable celebrities and business leaders. These provide a sample of the unique stories from our collection that give children insight into cultures outside of their own, helping to build empathy and understanding — particularly needed during this difficult time.

OUR GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM

“Progress lost takes years to regain. Teenage girls out of school may never return. I urge governments to put women and girls at the center of their efforts to recover from COVID-19. Gender equality and women’s rights are essential to getting through this pandemic together.”

- United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres

Launching A Telephone ‘Lifeline’

A UN policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on women warned, “Evidence from past epidemics shows that adolescent girls are at particular risk of dropping out and not returning to school even after the crisis is over.”

As Room to Read CEO Dr. Geetha Murali noted in a recent interview with BBC, “This is the last time some of these schools will see these girls because girls at a young age in many of the communities that Room to Read works in will face enormous pressure to get married early and to have children early. They also face the risk of being trafficked or put to work.”

Our Girls’ Education Program participants typically live in low-income, isolated and remote areas, making them especially likely to be forced to give up their education permanently as a result of this crisis. We are working around the clock to avoid this outcome, pivoting our programs to ensure we continue to cultivate the vital and enduring life skills that help girls protect their futures.

Because female role models have long been shown to increase girls’ aspirations for their own education, mentoring meetings have always been a key component of Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program. These meetings offer safe spaces for girls to address the challenges they may be facing, such as the pressure to drop out of school to marry early or contribute to family income.

Even while students are out of school, Room to Read staff are continuing to provide individual mentoring to girls by phone. They are using these mentoring sessions to emotionally support girls through the crisis and provide encouragement for continuing their academic study at home. Room to Read staff are also referring girls to official sources of information regarding staying safe and healthy and, as schools reopen, will help girls navigate challenges related to returning to school.

- In Nepal alone, for example, more than 1,200 Girls’ Education Program participants have been receiving distance mentoring from our social mobilizers. Our teams are also working with families to ensure they continue to support their daughters’ educations. As one social mobilizer said, “One of the Girls’ Education Program participants got married during the time of school closures due to the COVID-19 situation. Thus, it’s crucial for us to also talk to parents.”

Identifying and Supporting the Girls Most at Risk

Room to Read staff are meeting more frequently with Girls’ Education Program participants who are identified as “at-risk.” This risk is determined using Room to Read’s Risk and Response Tool, a powerful early warning system that helps our staff identify and immediately act on risk factors that are strongly associated with dropouts. We have updated this tool to reflect the risk factors that are associated with this educational crisis and identify girls who need more intensive support leading up to schools reopening.



The risk factors we will be tracking include:

- The number of girls who are continuing to study at home
- The number of girls in homes in which a family member has lost a job or source of income due to COVID-19
- The number of girls who are concerned about being able to return to school once schools reopen

In the coming month, as we have a better understanding of how long schools may be closed in the various countries we are in, we will be designing virtual group mentoring sessions, ensuring that girls continue to have access to the support of their peers, which we know is crucial in times of stress. We will also create virtual life skills sessions to sustain them in these difficult times, to be shared via smartphones and other available platforms, in situations where girls have connectivity.



EDUCATION ENDURES CAMPAIGN

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken away many things that most of us take for granted — in-person access to our loved ones, the ability to sit and learn in a classroom, and the opportunity to gather with like-minded individuals to support the causes we care about, to name just a few.

With your help, what this crisis won't take away are the futures of an entire generation of young people!

We know that when children learn, they are able to make change in their families, their communities and the world. That's the enduring benefit of education. Take it from Sapana, a Girls' Education Program graduate from Nepal, who is now a nurse.

“My parents insisted that I leave my job as a nurse because they were afraid of the pandemic. After a long discussion with them I was able to finally calm them out of the panic. I love my work, and this is why I studied so hard — so that I can be of help to others.”

- Sapana, Girls' Education Program graduate from Nepal



Your investment in our Education Endures Campaign will support our greatest needs. This ensures that learning continues during this crisis and every child receives his or her right to a quality education, even within the most vulnerable communities.

Education endures and provides solutions to many of the world's greatest challenges. Room to Read has long believed that World Change Starts with Educated Children®. Now, more than ever, that world change will only be possible because of you.

